

Book Review Section

Kim Hicks¹ *With* by Donald Harington, New Milford, CT: Toby Press, 2003.

It is difficult to categorize Harington's latest novel, which begins as the story of an abduction and ends with the creation of an Appalachian Eden. Along the way, Harington throws in a ghost story (of sorts), a survival story, and a variety of inter-and intra-species love stories. The novel's tone, a blend of practical and magical realism, is similarly expansive. An attentive reader can learn how to kidnap a girl, make soap, treat bee stings, use a Ouija board to communicate with animals, perform expert fellatio, smoke pork, and determine the sex of a snake. *With* contains echoes of Walden, the Bible, Lolita, and the Farmer's Almanac and—as an extra flourish—employs a narrative voice that can move seamlessly between characters, species, and states of being, all the while commenting self-consciously on its own devices. As if not all this were enough, Harington gives readers both a happy ending and enough questions to undermine that denouement.

What readers ultimately make of *With* will depend upon whether they believe captive creatures can transform the terms of their own captivity. The novel's plot is set in motion when state trooper Sugrue Alan pockets half a million dollars in confiscated drug money. Newly flush, Sugrue plans an early retirement. He finds and equips a remote mountain cabin, lays in a collection of toys, and kidnaps 8-year-old Robin Kerr to be his own "true love."

The planning and execution of Robin's abduction are chilling; Harington is a master of the police-procedural tone, and *With* could have succeeded as a straightforward thriller. However, the novel shifts direction abruptly when circumstances remove Sugrue from Robin's life. Isolated on Madewell Mountain, Robin must learn to fend for herself.

Although she lacks human companionship in the years that follow, Robin is not alone. Sugrue's dog, Hrepha, serves as foster mother, teacher, friend, sister. Here, a brief explanation of Hrepha's name is in order: In Harington's felicitous conception, dogs attempt to communicate with humans by speaking their own names, a conceit that produces dogs named "Yowrfrowr," "Ouruff," "Hrolf," and "Yipyip." Many local animals, whom Hrepha presents to Robin as birthday gifts, join the two over the years:

a bobkitten, a raccoon, a deer, a snake, and a bear. Robin's strangest companion is Adam, a creature at once separate from, and deeply attuned to, the natural world. Adam is an in-habit, the spiritual residue of a 12-year-old boy who once lived in the cabin. Although, strictly, he is not living, neither is he a ghost:

Ghosts are the spirits of creatures who no longer live. In-habits are the spirits of creatures who are still alive. An in-habit is part of someone who loves a particular place so very much that regardless of where they go they always leave their in-habit behind. (p. 77)

Adam helps Robin learn the woodcraft and house-holding skills she needs to thrive in her new home: More important, he helps imbue her with the love of place that keeps him tethered to Madewell Mountain. As if wanting to compensate readers for the novel's disturbing opening, Harington ends the book with a frenzy of wish fulfillment. Robin, now a lovely 18-year-old, finds her perfect mate, briefly revisits the civilized world with him, then returns to Madewell Mountain.

Throughout the novel, Harington has referred to the Ozarks as "paradise." At the end, it is clear that the term has Biblical weight. Like Adam and Eve restored to the garden, Robin and her mate live in comfort and peace with nature and all its creatures in a cabin renovated to the standards of the Architectural Record and stocked with vintage French wine and an extensive library—Paradise indeed!

In the novel's final passage, delivered in a millennial future tense, Robin thinks back to her abductor: She will know that none of this will have been possible without him. "Thank you, Sugrue, she will say" (p. 491).

Robin's parting words demonstrate both her extraordinary capacity for forgiveness and her ability to transcend the original conditions of her captivity. Still, they raise questions that complicate the novel's exuberant resolution. Does Robin's earthly paradise truly reform the terms of Sugrue's original desires? Does being given everything someone else thinks you want constitute a happy ending? Ghost story, love story, survival story, *With* also can be read as a story about the contradictions inherent in domestication. In this case, Harington's careful attention to dogs, the ultimate domestic companion animal, makes thematic sense.

Hrepha begins the novel as Sugrue's first female captive. He has separated her from her mother, and she is afraid that Sugrue "might do greater harm than he already had, might even do away with her" (p. 3). However, she is incapable of leaving him.

Sugrue's appropriation of Robin prefigures his appropriation of Hrepha; his appropriation of Hrepha sets the terms of Robin's captivity. Robin and Hrepha are Sugrue's possessions: his pets. It is curious, then, to see these female captives acting out Sugrue's acquisitive habits throughout the novel. Hrepha gives Robin a bobkitten whose mother she has accidentally killed, the first in a long line of living gifts who constitute Robin's menagerie. These gifts are the fulfillment of any little girl's fantasy; they also are an uncomfortable reminder of Robin's own captivity, a point Harington underlines by referring to the adoption of Robin's bear cub as an "abduction" (p. 344). The desire to possess a captive animal is what got Robin into the mountains in the first place, making the difference between her actions and Sugrue's less distinct and less significant than they might seem. If Robin and Hrepha repeat Sugrue's original sin, do their actions revise its meaning, or merely widen its scope?

The belief that animals taken from their habitat can come to enjoy their captivity is a common justification for all the abductions in *With*. After kidnapping Robin and installing her in the cabin, Sugrue reflects:

Did he feel sorry for the poor girl? No, there wasn't no reason whatsoever that he should feel any such thing, because he was doing everything in his power to create a new home and a new kind of life for her to make her happy and keep her happy forevermore. (p. 145)

Although he does not predict accurately the sequence of events that lead to Robin's happiness, things have turned out—by the novel's end—exactly as he wished they would. Robin is thoroughly at home on the mountain, sexually adventurous, the willing partner of a man many years her senior: in other words, thoroughly domesticated according to Sugrue's original plan. Does Sugrue, then, deserve Robin's thanks? Her closing benediction receives no reply, so Harington leaves it up to readers to decide. The persistence of this sticky question in the face of the novel's extravagantly happy ending may be *With's* most artful achievement.

* Kim Hicks, Mt. Holyoke Community College

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¹ Correspondence should be sent to Kim Hicks, 221 Chestnut Street Florence, MA 01062. E-mail: khicks@hcc.mass.edu

Jonathan Burt¹ *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal*. Edited by Cary Wolfe, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003, 203 pages.

Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of the Species, and Posthumanist Theory. Edited by Cary Wolfe, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2003, 240 pages.

There is no doubting that Cary Wolfe is one of the most interesting anglophone theorists writing about nonhuman animals in the humanities at the present time. Everything he has written, in my opinion, deserves reading carefully—more than once. Wolfe, at times, can be intensely rewarding. Deeply indebted in style and thinking both to Jacques Derrida—in theoretical terms and the manner in which he critiques other writers—and to the social theories of Nicklas Luhmann, Wolfe brings a formidable intellectual tradition against his main target: speciesism. This is the idea that the possession of exclusive advantages, abilities, and rights is determined by membership of a particular species at the expense of other species that, accordingly, are negatively valued. The writers he criticizes, many of whom are sympathetic in varying degrees to animal causes, include Peter Singer, Tom Regan, Stanley Cavell, Vicki Hearne, Jean-Luc Ferry, and Zygmunt Baumann. In Wolfe's eyes, none of them match up to the need to reconfigure radically the idea of the human so that it is based on the inclusion—rather than the exclusion—of the nonhuman other.

Despite the challenges these writers pose to many of the tenets of human superiority, a residual human-centered thinking manages to creep in again through the back door, thus reasserting the human/nonhuman boundary with all its attendant risks. The most notable of these risks is that the transcendence of the human not only entails a sacrificial logic, by which the nonhuman becomes expendable, but also leads to the possibility that other humans may become placed in the nonhuman category, thus countenancing violence “against the social other of *whatever* species” (AR, p. 8).

There is little to quarrel about in this central thesis of Wolfe's work. It would be a little like the neighbor who hears a great party going on next door and goes round to tell the revelers to turn the music down, rather than just gate-crashing the party. The problem, however, arises not only with what Wolfe offers in place of these deficient theorizations but also with the much greater question of where the increasingly prominent subject of animal studies in the humanities stands in relation to traditions of writing really geared to explaining human questions.

Furthermore, these traditions are strongly dependent not only on texts, as Derrida has demonstrated, but also on a textually structured view of language and symbolization. The idea of making the concept of the human embrace its otherness, “. . . to enhance our understanding of the embeddedness and entanglement of the ‘human’ in all that it is not . . .” [AR p. 193], reveals that, even in Wolfe, the idea of the human is still the center of gravity around which everything turns and into which everything flows. This is indicated further by the case studies in *Animal Rites*, which include a stunning reading of the film *Silence of the Lambs* and critiques of Ernest Hemingway and Michael Crichton novels—in none of which can the animal be found as a center of focus. Indeed, there is a glorious irony in that one of the few figures who, apart from Wolfe and—to a lesser extent—Derrida, manages to deny all the conventions of humanism and thus transcend speciesism is the cannibalistic serial killer, Hannibal Lecter.

It is not clear to me whether it is profitable to continue addressing the “question of the animal” as an ever more refined and complicated reworking of the categories “human” and “animal.” For animal studies to move forward, it makes more sense to emancipate the animal not only from the concept of the human methodologically but also from the theoretical traditions within the humanities that confine the issues of human-animal relations to increasingly labyrinthine versions of boundary making. By that, I mean we need to bring the animal center stage as the main focus of study, sidestepping the issue of the human-animal boundary, and set this study within the overarching context of human-animal relations—not the overarching context of theorizing about humans. These relations we can understand as articulated by texts, certainly, but, more important, as a set of concrete practices and institutions that still need to be understood far better and made more visible.

Because so much of human-animal relations is structured around killing, there is, as Wolfe recognizes, a pressing urgency to these forms of study. However, the judicious and highly qualified distance suggested by Wolfe highlights a problem of ambivalence that haunts much of the ethical writing derived from postmodernism. This distance highlights his support “in abeyance” of the Great Ape Project or other animal welfare initiatives because of,

the underlying fact that the operative theories and procedures we now have for articulating the social and legal relation between ethics and action are inadequate . . . for thinking about the ethics of *the question of the human as well as the nonhuman animal*. (AR, p. 192)

It is a little like saying we have to fill in the forms correctly before we can act.

Despite the emphasis on incorporating otherness, there is little in the way of addressing the question of cultural differences in relation to the animal except, perhaps, Charlie LeDuff's essay on migrant workers in the slaughterhouse in *Zoontologies*. Incidentally, along with Paul Patton's essay on horse training, this is the only essay in the latter volume that analyzes the "institution" of human-animal relations. This lacuna still characterizes much writing in animal studies. It does so despite the following:

1. the key historical importance of religious differences in slaughter that reveals significant polarizations of attitudes toward animals within a single society;
2. culture clashes around conservation projects in different parts of the world;
3. disputes between Western animal activists and indigenous hunters; and
4. significant cross-cultural influences on thinking about animals.

Instead, the singularity of the phrase, "the question of the animal" that recurs in both these volumes seems to reinforce the sense that this is a culturally homogenous problem for a highly specific, theoretical, literary tradition.

These objections aside, there is much to admire in both these volumes. Wolfe's long, philosophical tour de force, reprinted in both volumes, "In the shadow of Wittgenstein's lion: language, ethics, and the question of the animal," contains some remarkable, close readings of thinkers such as Cavell, Derrida, Maturana, and Varela. It is a pity that this is not a longer book in its own right. Derrida's unusually succinct and clear essay on the animal in Lacan, "And say the animal responded?" is also worthwhile. Steve Baker, one of the few writers writing around postmodernism prepared to ask big questions—"what is it to be animal?"—actually offers some answers around issues of art, creativity, and imitation and writes with his characteristic, intelligent open-mindedness. There also are two good essays by Ursula Heise and Judith Roof on nature and technology and Freud and DNA, respectively. However, rewarding as these books are—and they should be compulsory reading for anyone interested in animal studies—they point backward rather than forward.

The "question of the animal" is a phrase masking the fact that so much of this theorizing really still is a fetishization of the human; in fact, the "question of the human." In emancipating itself from this framework, "sloughing the human," to use the title of Baker's essay, animal studies would become effectively less a sub-branch of the humanities—wrapped up in human centered discourses and texts—and more of a disciplinary field in its own right. To take the animal as the starting point in any analysis of human-animal relations also would mean to begin theorizing the animal out of the specifics of such relations—rather than continuing to use theorizations that derive from human-human relationships.

Furthermore, the history of human-animal relationships is a far darker, more disturbing, and less abstract history. It is more urgently in need of a concrete analysis than postmodern and posthuman writing, for all its complexity, really seems to grasp. By way of analogy, one might suggest that animal studies is like watching a film in which one tracks only the animals and ignores the human plot, while bearing in mind that the animal's fate is controlled completely by humans and that there will be no happy ending.

* Jonathan Burt, Ferry House, United Kingdom

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- ¹ Correspondence should be sent to Jonathan Burt, Ferry House, Bottisham Lock, Waterbeach, Cambridge CB5 9LN UK. E-mail: pcfav@aol.com